

geluk  
onder  
druk?

# GELUK ONDER DRUK? (HAPPINESS UNDER PRESSURE)

Research into the mental well-being of young people  
in the Netherlands



unicef   
for every child



## SUMMARY

### Is young people's happiness under pressure?

In recent years, there have been numerous and significant signals that the mental well-being of youngsters is under pressure. UNICEF the Netherlands wanted to find out whether these signals were correct. Are young people (10-18 years) content with their lives, do they experience stress, pressure or emotional problems? And what solutions and tools could be used to improve the mental well-being of young people? These questions formed the basis of a qualitative and quantitative study carried out between December 2018 and May 2020 by the Trimbos Institute, the Alexander Foundation and Utrecht University on the behalf of UNICEF the Netherlands. This study provides, for the very first time, nationally representative figures on positive mental health, stress, performance pressure and the degree of social comparison. National figures on the mental well-being of MBO (vocational education and training) and HBO (higher professional education) students up to the age of 18 are also available for the first time. To answer the above questions, the vision and experiences of young people themselves must be front and centre of any research. As such, they were closely involved in the project from the outset – when the research plan was in the development stages. They contributed ideas on research questions and methodologies and they formulated recommendations.

## Mental well-being appears stable

The 'Geluk onder Druk?' (Happiness under Pressure) study revealed that the mental well-being of young people appears to be relatively stable. The percentage of young people who scored higher on emotional problems has also remained fairly constant over time. However, there are differences between groups of young people: some groups are able to cope better with stress and difficult events or are able to 'do well for themselves' better than others. The study also revealed that stress from schoolwork has risen considerably over the past ten years and remained high between 2017 and 2019. Young people primarily experience stress as a result of school and homework and interaction with peers, and less so from home or social media.

## Stress and pressure

The quantitative research results on stress and pressure among young people show that almost half of 16-year-olds experience pressure from schoolwork. Furthermore, almost one in three young people between the ages of 12 and 16 feel under pressure to meet their own or someone else's expectations (pressure to perform). Among pupils in years 7 and 8 of primary school, the opinion of others is the main source of stress, followed by homework and school-related stress. School was also cited most often as a source of stress during the qualitative interviews with young people. They specifically mentioned the pressure that young people experience to constantly perform, stress about tests, about grades obtained early on that count towards their final exams and about the high demands that they put on themselves. Circumstances at school are also a cause of stress; for example, too many tests in one week, too much homework and tests and essays that are scheduled to take place immediately after a holiday so that during the holiday they have no time to relax.

One notable finding from the study is that young people experience relatively little stress from social media. This is particularly striking because social media are often identified as being sources of pressure and stress. Young people see this differently; for them, social media offer a lot of benefits as well. Social media constitute a form of social support for young people, which is in fact a key protective factor for mental well-being.

## Positive mental health

The quantitative research indicates that many young people have positive mental health. For example, three quarters of the young people who took part in the study reported high levels of doing well for themselves. Two thirds of the young people mentioned resilience and a high level of self-esteem. A minority of young people are worried about the future (less than 10 percent). Such concerns are most pronounced among young people in secondary education (20 percent). Positive mental health contributes to a higher degree of perceived mental well-being among young people. In the qualitative research, young people also indicated that good personal development helps them to cope with difficult situations, to make choices and to feel good about themselves.

## Social support

The importance of social support is highlighted in both the quantitative and qualitative parts of



the study. Receiving more support from a father, mother, brother, sister, best friend, classmates and teachers is associated with fewer emotional problems and increased life satisfaction, which leads to better mental well-being. There is a particularly strong link between emotional problems and a father's support. A significant number of young people mentioned in the interviews that they also found support or comfort in their pet.

Although young people consider support from friends, family and from school to be very important, they indicated that they do not always feel supported or seen by their teachers. According to the interviewees, efforts to improve the social-emotional skills of both young people and teachers could help to improve social relationships and support.

### **Vulnerable groups**

The study identified a number of vulnerable groups. Young people from one-parent families, for example, reported more negatively on life satisfaction, emotional problems and pressure from schoolwork than young people from two-parent families. This group also experiences more stress due to their home situation, their own problems and the opinions of others.

Young people with a higher level of education seem to be more susceptible to pressure from schoolwork, stress from homework and pressure to perform. They also experience higher levels of stress as a result of all kinds of sources of pressure combined (school, homework, social media, part-time jobs, sports, etc.). Young people with a lower level of education scored higher on problems with peers and stated less often that they had social support. HBO (higher professional education) students experience more pressure from schoolwork than MBO (vocational education and training) students.

Young people with a Western migration background do less well for themselves and experience more stress, pressure to perform and pressure from schoolwork than young people with a Dutch background. Young people with a non-Western migration background reported that they have less social support, less leisure time and less good general health than young people with a Dutch background.

However, this group did report more resilience in dealing with difficult situations, they have greater self-esteem which is also less dependent on others and they experience less pressure to perform from others compared with young people with a Dutch background.

In various areas we can see differences between boys and girls; girls tend to experience emotional problems more often, and in secondary education they are less satisfied with their lives, they experience more stress, school pressure and pressure to perform and they score lower on resilience, doing well for themselves, self-esteem and general health. In addition, girls reported more frequently that their self-esteem is dependent on others (social comparison). However, girls are more likely than boys to find that they have sufficient free time outside of school. At MBO (vocational education and training) and HBO (higher professional education) levels, girls reported more often than boys that they were unhappy, felt depressed or cried. Additionally, girls worry more and are more concerned about the future than boys.

## Protective factors and risk factors

Knowledge about risk and protective factors can help strengthen mental well-being among young people and prevent psychological problems. As part of this research project, we investigated possible risk and protective factors for three outcome variables (pressure from schoolwork, life satisfaction and emotional problems). We would like to stress here that this research focuses on correlation, and that on the basis of the current data we are not in a position to comment on causal relationships.

Protective factors for pressure experienced by young people resulting from schoolwork include: social support, more exercise, a high level of self-esteem, a sense of resilience and having sufficient free time. Of these factors, having sufficient free time was most strongly related to feeling under pressure. In addition, it appeared that being able to talk to a father, brother, sister or best friend and support from the teacher could serve as a potential 'buffer' in the connection between pressure from schoolwork and emotional problems.

Risk factors for experiencing pressure from schoolwork included: a higher degree of stress in general, a high level of social comparison, putting pressure on oneself to perform and a higher degree of hyperactivity. Of all the risk factors, a higher degree of stress in general correlated most strongly with feeling under pressure due to schoolwork.

Several of the protective and risk factors of pressure from school work also came to the fore during the qualitative interviews. When asked what young people need to feel good and what helps them to deal with things they find difficult, they stressed the importance of support from their environment, lots of exercise and sport, having a high level of self-esteem (being able to be yourself/ personal development) and having enough free time.

As such, positive mental health would appear to be a key prerequisite for the mental well-being of young people. The same conclusion can also be drawn from the qualitative interviews conducted with young people. They indicated that good personal development was necessary in order to be able to deal with difficult situations, make good choices and feel good about themselves.

## Potential solutions

If we want to improve the mental well-being of young people, then a commitment to reducing the stress and pressure experienced as a result of school and homework is hugely important. It is also important to look at how young people can deal with problems related to their interactions with friends, classmates and their environment in an effective and constructive way, and the potential role of social media in this.

The young people who took part in the research were very clear about what they need for good mental health in the qualitative part of the study, i.e.: a supportive social environment (friends, family, school), good personal development (having a goal or vision for the future, being able to be yourself, being able to deal with emotions and with others, being able to fail and pick oneself up), the opportunity to do nice things (music, sports, be outdoors), not having to do anything and having enough time, as well as good health, enough money, general awareness of problems around the world and, finally, social media.

The results of this study also point towards a number of potential buttons that can be pressed to increase well-being and reduce the level of school pressure experienced by young people. These buttons include the support they receive from fathers and teachers, stress reduction, a strong personal identity (including autonomy, self-confidence, self-acceptance), resilience (able to cope with stressful events), ensuring sufficient free time, reducing social comparison and reducing the pressure to perform.

The young people themselves have the final say on the matter. All young people who participated in the qualitative part of the study made recommendations for strengthening the mental well-being of young people in the Netherlands. These were then supplemented by the research steering committee, comprised of young people. The recommendations made by young people, in order of the frequency with which they were mentioned, are as follows:

1. Reduce school pressure and focus more on personal development at school
2. Provide a safe environment, both at school and at home
3. Provide accessible help and support for psychological problems, break the taboo and offer a sympathetic ear
4. Increase the voice and influence of young people, particularly concerning school issues, but also in general
5. Increase understanding of the world in which young people live: this can lead to greater understanding
6. Provide young people with good information and guidance: especially regarding school matters, but also in other areas of life
7. Improve society: climate change, teacher shortage, poverty
8. Young people also have advice for other young people: don't keep looking for more in life, respect one another, accept the things that are less pleasant, stay positive and ask for help

## Methodological justification

This research project consists of quantitative and qualitative sub-studies. For the quantitative study, national representative monitor studies (HBSC research, Peilstationsonderzoek, MBO/HBO monitors) were used, which made it possible to formulate representative statements about the mental well-being of Dutch school students between the ages of 10 and 18. For the qualitative part of the study, the research team spoke to young people themselves – through in-depth interviews, panel discussions and action research.

Previous research on this theme focused primarily on psychological problems and complaints. However, international research shows that mapping positive mental health can be a valuable additional tool for monitoring mental health. This ‘Geluk onder Druk?’ research project was therefore the first to collect nationally representative figures on positive mental health among young people of school age. Positive mental health refers to aspects such as doing well for oneself (happiness, good quality of life, purpose and meaning), self-esteem (self-acceptance, self-confidence, autonomy, being yourself) and resilience (recovering after stressful events and coping with difficult situations).

This study is also the first to publish nationally representative figures on stress, pressure to perform (pressure from young people themselves or their environment) and the degree of social comparison. National figures on the mental well-being of MBO (vocational education and training) and HBO (higher professional education) students up to the age of 18 are also available for the first time. Finally, this research provides a broad, qualitative snapshot of what young people consider to be crucial protective factors, which can help them to have a healthy mental well-being.



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## About UNICEF

UNICEF is the United Nations Children's Rights organisation. UNICEF has a mandate to safeguard the rights of all children, everywhere. That mandate is rooted in the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which sets out universal and indivisible rights that apply to every child, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by world leaders in 2015, which apply to every country.

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